

Celebrity, Politics, Power

Skidmore College
Fall 2020
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Course Description

Fame, self-branding, stardom, performance: what is the relationship between celebrity culture, political life, and religion in the United States? What is the difference between a religious movement and a celebrity culture—and under what conditions are they the same thing? This interdisciplinary class explores these questions using critical cultural and religious studies theory. Attuned to the media landscape around the 2020 election, we explore the overlap between popular culture and Presidential politics, analyzing the blurry lines between these domains. Other topics include the intertwined histories of religious and celebrity subcultures; gendered notions of health, beauty, and fitness; the overlap between spiritual devotion and celebrity fandom; raced the rise of self-branding and social media micro-celebrities; and the ways that individuals become commodities to be produced and consumed.

On Health, Social Movements, and Academic Work

We acknowledge upfront: we are living through a global health emergency that has seriously exacerbated preexisting race, class, and gender injustice. The pandemic has coincided with worldwide movements to defend Black lives and to abolish the systems that enable racist policing. Many of us in the class are touched personally by these circumstances and are grief-stricken, afraid, angry, confused, activated, exhausted, or some rotating combination of all these things. In other words: schoolwork nowhere near the most important thing in your life right now, nor should it be. It probably does not even make the top ten list. That is okay.

All of the above taken under consideration, this class is designed to give you historical and theoretical resources for interpreting our current moment. The study of religion deals with questions about what is sacred, what is valued, what is diagnosed as evil and what gets imagined as cure, and how small groups of people can rise to dominant or even divine power. We approach these questions through lenses of religious and cultural studies with an emphasis on critical race, feminist, and Marxian traditions.

Assignments + Assessment

Grading Practices

In this class we'll practice what's sometimes known as ungrading or student-driven assessment. The upshot is that **students grade themselves**, in consultation with Prof. H. Students receive consistent qualitative feedback on writing and engagement; students also produce self-assessments and reflections with every assignment. Grades in the course come at the end of the year, in December, after you turn in your final portfolio. The last part of your portfolio is a final reflection on your learning in the course + a suggested final grade. You'll come to this grade based on overall self- and instructor-assessment on the assignments, your final portfolio, how you decide to weigh them in relation to each other (see above for suggested ranges), and—most important—your own honest reflection about effort, progress, and growth.

Want to know more about this assessment method and where it comes from? Check out [this post by Jesse Stommel](#) and [this article by Vicki Reitenaur](#) to learn more about it and what it looks like in different contexts.

Assignments

There are five major assignments, including overall consistent engagements. You get to decide, within parameters, how they are weighted in your final grade.

- **Assignment 1: Worlds of Celebrity (10-15%).** The first half of this class looks at the 1970s as a particularly resonant moment in the history of U.S. celebrity culture. In consultation with Prof. H. and based on your interests, you'll be assigned a celebrity from that decade. Your job will be to research and introduce the world of that celebrity to the class via a recording on our shared podcast channel. Note that the emphasis here is not on personal biography but rather on the cultural-political context + conflicts that were important to their rise to fame. You can approach the task however you want, so long as you follow a few parameters: use only one Synth segment (256 seconds, or a little over 4 minutes); do not mention the celebrity's name or biographical information until two minutes (or longer) into the recording. No need for major research here; use the Ferguson, Phillips-Fein, Foner and one extra background reading (consult with Prof H). Use the hashtag #CelebWorld to post your bibliography and any extra video/image content on Synth.
- **Assignment 2: What's in a Biography? (10-15%).** The second assignment draws on class themes about the power at play in personal storytelling. Keeping in mind the knowledge you've gained about cultural and political conditions in the period, you'll read an autobiography (or, if one is unavailable, a biography) of your celebrity. Then, you'll write a 500-word essay — posted on our class blog, and written so that an average college student could “get” it — that uses evidence from the book to answer the question: What are the political stakes of this personal story? What “story of now” does it convey? How should we assess the underlying message? Due 10/9 or anytime that weekend.
- **Assignment 3: Final Installation or Unessay (15-20%).** The final project, due on the last day of classes, is your chance to take course frameworks in a direction that is of special interest to you. (For many of you the work on 1970s celebrities will align with your interests and can inform this project but you're also welcome to take it in a totally different direction). Propose a project that draws on skills you've developed in and out of this class, and that demonstrates what you've learned. Ideally, and in recognition that so much of “celebrity politics” happen in public, this will be a project that you can share with the class and maybe even with a wider audience. For example: you could record a podcast series that gives historical context to a celebrity fad, design a campus event on media literacy, create an installation of photographs, write a research paper that you can make accessible to others, shoot a short film, or anything else you come up with. These projects can be done in small groups or solo — there is even an option to make it a class-wide project — with the understanding that the work/effort for *each person* should be equivalent to what you'd put into an 8-10 page final essay. Proposals due on the dedicated Slack channel by 10/30. Final projects due electronically, or to my office if they're physical objects, by 11/20. More details in class.
- **Evaluations + Portfolio (15% completion).**
 - **Self-evaluations.** For each major assignment, you'll submit a self-assessment of up to 1-page. This document should begin, “Dear Prof. H, this is what it was like to do this

assignment...” From there, the floor is open. You can address what you find to be strengths of the work, any challenges or weaknesses you see, questions that came up during the process, or goals that for the next phase of reading, writing, or learning. In the case of group work, the evaluation should reflect on that process and dynamic. I will respond to each self-assessment with a page of constructive feedback. You are welcome to use this feedback to revise your papers for your final portfolio, but this is not required.

- **Final portfolio.** All of the class materials — a few examples of engagement you want to highlight, your evaluations, assignments 1 + 2, any revisions you decide to make, the final project — make up your final portfolio in the class. In other words, the portfolio is mostly stuff that you’ve done before. **The one additional item is a 1-2 page final reflection on your learning + a self-assigned grade for the course.** You choose whether to assemble these materials as one big document to email or, now that you have a WordPress account, to upload them to a private page. Submit by the last day of finals period.
- **Engagement (30-50%):** the most important part of the class. This includes discussion posts and responses, individual-prompts, and group-work. The key to making the semester a success is everyone’s consistent engagement, so that we can build a learning community. All of us are in different situations this term, so there will be lots of pathways and plenty of room for flexibility in how you do this. There will be Slack posts, mini-podcasts, chances for synchronous engagement, and group work. Read on for details.

Weekly Schedule and Class Arc

Weekly assignments and meetings—i.e. those that are related to “engagement”—are designed to be consistent, so that you know what to expect each week. On weeks when there is a major assignment due, the workload will be much lighter. Here’s a visual layout of the week..

CELEBRITY POLITICS POWER: weekly pattern	MON	TUES	WEDS	THURS	FRIDAY		
UNSTRUCTURED PREP	~independent reading + annotating + podcast listening~ <i>early week</i>						
SYNCHRONOUS			~ full class reading group ~ <i>Wednesday 9-10 a.m.</i>		~full class breakfast club~ <i>Friday 9-10 a.m.</i>		
ASYNCH + DEADLINES					~weekly prompt~ <i>you choose when to complete this / due by Fri @ 5 p.m.</i>		
SLACK POSTS	~ slack posts will happen throughout the week: 1 post in #hottish-takes, 3 responses to peers on any channel <i>all week / deadline Friday @ 5 p.m.</i>						
OPTIONAL		~ office hours on zoom ~ <i>Tuesday 11 a.m.-12 p.m. like a coffee hour!</i>		~live slack chat w/ Prof. H ~ <i>Weds 1-2 p.m. bring your small group ?'s</i>			
	~ all week: reach out for an individual meeting and/or start a conversation on one of our platforms (slack chat, synth, text, or email) ~						
	~class movie nights: we can watch assigned and/or nominated films together and chat using Slack~						

There are four major kinds of *everyday engagement* work in this class:

- **Independent prep work:** Early in the week or over the weekend, you should check the class schedule to see what’s on deck for the week’s classes. Each day of class has its own separate page, which you can find in the relevant unit on the “[Schedule](#)” tab. The first thing you’ll see on every class page is a checklist of tasks to complete for that day + any PDFs or media links that go with them. You’ll notice that the tasks correspond with the calendar above. Readings and Synth mini-lectures completed before class; group work on most Wednesdays; an independent prompt on most Fridays; and any relevant guidance on Slack posts for the week.
- **Synchronous class time:** We are a small enough class to have synchronous discussions twice a week: Wednesdays and on most Fridays from 9-10 a.m. On Wednesdays, these discussions will focus on the readings and may include small group work. On Fridays, these discussions will be less structured and in some weeks they will be fully optional. We’ll mostly use them to check in with one another, talk about connections between course content and pop culture this week, or dive into topics suggested by students (be in touch if you’d like to engage by leading one of these discussions!).
- **Asynchronous prompts.** On weeks without major deadlines, you’ll have a prompt for a mini-project, sometimes to be completed individually and sometimes with an option to do it as a group. Sometimes they’ll be a place to get your gears turning about upcoming assignments (i.e. collaboratively create a key terms map; email an informal project proposal to Prof. H). Others are just check-ins about the course (i.e. DM Prof. H with a question about the class; create a meme responding to a reading). Think of these as time-bound the way in-class exercises are time-bound: usually it should take you more than 40 minutes unless you want it to.
- **Slack posts.** Much of discussions will take place on Slack. There are some channels specifically about class content and material, where each week you’ll post at least one original post in #hottish-takes, based on the weekly prompt, and 3-5 posts on another shared channel of your choosing. A good starting place for any reading post is to see if you can identify the main takeaway, an example that illustrates the point, and what you’d like to discuss further.

Class Reading Schedule, Day-by-Day

You can get a bird’s eye view of the course below. Each individual class meeting has a corresponding page on our course website, so you should refer to that for links, reading guide questions, and specific prompts for the week.

UNIT 1: What’s a Celebrity?

WEEK 1 Defining celebrity and its relationship to religion

8/26 – Introductions; optional reading, “Celebrity” by Suzanne Leonard and Dianne Negra” (4 pp)

8/28 - *Stuart Hall: Culture and Representation* documentary on Kanopy (optional watch party on 8/27 at 8 p.m., over Zoom).

WEEK 2 Religious Celebrity, Celebrity Gods

9/2 - Kathryn Lofton, “The Celebrification of Religion” (2017)

9/4 - Roderick Ferguson, "The Proliferation of Minority Difference" from *Reorder of Things* (2011); Kim Phillips-Fein, "Decisive Decade: Reevaluating the 1970s," *Dissent* (Winter 2011).

WEEK 3 Historical Precedents

9/9 - Eric Foner, "Triumph of Conservatism" pp. 1030-1058 (skim what's most interesting); do the tailored reading for your "World of Celebrity" assignment (consult with Prof. H)

9/11 - No assigned reading. ****assignment 1 due****

UNIT 2: On Charismatic Authority and Its Creation

WEEK 4 Defining Charisma

9/16 - Max Weber, "The Sociology of Charismatic Authority" from *Economy and Society* + the editor's Introduction to Adorno's "The Authoritarian Personality" reprint (2019)

9/18 - TEDx Speaker Guide; selected TED Talks; selected sources on the Azusa Street revival

WEEK 5 Charisma from Hollywood to the White House

9/23 Michael Rogin, "Ronald Reagan, The Movie" (1988)

9/25 Stephen Marche, "Celebrity Warfare: Image and Politics in the Age of Trump" (2017); reality television shows to be chosen as a class

WEEK 6 The Racial Politics of (Religious?) Charisma

9/30 *Color Adjustment* documentary, dir. Marlon Riggs (1992) on Kanopy

10/2 Excerpts from Michelle Obama, *Becoming* (2019); Keeanga-Yamhata Taylor, "Succeeding While Black" (2019)

UNIT 3: The Manufacture of Culture

WEEK 7: Commodity vs. Authenticity; Real vs. Fake

10/7 Marx, "The Commodity Fetish and the Secret Thereof" from *Capital* (1884).

10/9 Stephen Thrasher, “Super Slaves: Breeding and Controlling the Black Male Body Through Sports” (2016); primary sources on professional sports #BLM activism; ***assignment 2 due***

WEEK 8: Private vs. Public; Labor vs. Self-Made

10/14 Kathryn Lofton, “Kardashian Nation: Work in America’s Klan” in *Consuming Religion* (2017); spend time on one of the Kardashian Klan’s social media pages

10/16 Dayna Tortorici, “My Instagram” in *N+1* (2020); Vanessa Diaz, selections from *Manufacturing Celebrity: Latino Paparazzi and Women Reporters in Hollywood* (2020)

WEEK 9: Reality vs. Truth; Exceptional vs. Ordinary

10/21 Brenda Weber, “Makeover Nation: Americanness, Neoliberalism, and the Citizen-Subject” from *Makeover TV* (2009)

10/23 Paige Skinner, “Waco, Reborn” (2018); Stephanie Dugay, “Queer Eye and the Myth of the Self-Made Man” (2018; optional episodes of *Queer Eye* and/or *Fixer Upper*)

UNIT 4: Fandom, Devotion, Desire

Week 10 Freedom vs. Control; Agency vs. Discipline

10/28 Theodor Adorno, “The Culture Industry” (1947)

10/30 excerpts from Hannah Ewens, “Fangirls: Scenes from Modern Music Culture” (2020); Mia You “Everything I Needed to Know About Poetry I Learned from #KPOP” *Poetry Foundation* (2015); ****final project proposal due on Slack channel***

Week 11 Woke Followers vs. Fallen Angels

11/4 Selected readings on celebrity-driven political campaigns, especially those with a religious element (chosen closer to the time based on news cycle and class interest); Helen Lewis, “How Capitalism Drives Cancel Culture” *Atlantic* (2020)

11/6 TBD readings on the perennial puzzle: who is Kanye West?

Week 12 Celebrity Activists vs. Emergent (Religious?) Collectives

11/11 Greta Thunberg's speech at the UN Climate Action Summit; Katy Lederer, "Can They Read? Greta Thunberg and Her Critics" *N+I* (September 5, 2019)

11/13 class choice: we'll address cultures of celebrity within a social movement of interest to the class. Potential options include *Hamilton*, Lin Manuel-Miranda, and Puerto Rican independence; #MeToo and #TimesUp; #BLM and movement celebrities; superstar progressives like AOC, #TheSquad, and Bernie Sanders; celebrity pundits and provocateurs on the right; or anything else of general interest and relevance

Week 13 The Politics of Desire

11/18 Andrea Long Chu, "Bad TV" *N+I* (Spring 2018); Gabriel Winant, "We Found Love in a Hopeless Place," *N+I* (Spring 2015)

11/20 Class wrap up and final project discussion; *****final installation/unessay due*****

Finals Period

*****turn in your final portfolio + self evaluation by the end of finals period*****